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The Awesome Responsibility of Leadership (Darien, CT)

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**New Canaan Society
Darien CT
Breakfast
May 7, 2010**

“The Awesome Responsibility of Leadership”

C. William Pollard

I am sure that most, if not all, of you in this room have suffered some sort of loss as the result of the problems in our economy of the past two years.

Well, we had one of those roller coaster days in the market yesterday. Was it caused by the debt problems in Greece resulting from the irresponsible decisions of government leaders of the past ten years or was there also a trading error that contributed to the volatility?

During the last 24 months we have experienced domestic and global economic meltdowns, foreclosures and unemployment at record levels, and an unprecedented involvement of government in an attempt to correct the situation.

As we continue to seek an understanding of the causes for these turmoils in our markets and in our economy, we should recognize the reality that it is people who make markets work and make governments work, people who can be right or wrong, good or

bad, honest or dishonest, prudent or selfish. People who, in Peter Drucker's words, are imperfect, weak, sinners, and yet made in God's image and responsible for their actions.

Several months ago, President Obama, in reviewing what had occurred in our economy, suggested that “we had arrived at this point as a result of an era of profound irresponsibility that engulfed both private business firms and public institutions, including some of our largest corporations and the seats of power in Washington D.C.”

If he is accurate in his conclusion, what does responsible leadership look like? How do we implement it? Does responsible leadership also involve moral leadership? Can the ethical and moral judgments that are required in a dynamic and changing world be determined solely by more rules and regulations?

While legislative actions may bring a higher standard of accountability and provide a “stick” of more penalties for violations, they cannot mandate honesty, character, or responsible actions of a leader.

Drucker would say that responsible leadership first starts with understanding what leadership is all about.

He would go on to say that it is not about “leadership qualities” or “charisma.” It's not about title or position. It is not by itself good or desirable. Leadership is just a

means – to what end is the crucial question – and then Drucker would remind us that the end involves: the people who follow, the direction they are headed, their growth and development, and the importance of achieving a beneficial good result from their combined effort.

Drucker also would say that leadership should recognize that the management of people is not just the science of organizational structures, processes, and procedures, but it is also a liberal art. As we lead and manage people, we need to understand the nature of the human condition and recognize that our humanity cannot be defined solely by its physical or rational nature, but also has a spiritual dimension. It is this spiritual side of our humanity that influences our character, our ability to determine right and wrong, to recognize good and evil, and to make moral judgments. It is the driver for developing a philosophy of life and a world view that can provide a moral and ethical standard that is not relative and functions even when there are no prescribed rules.

On questions of faith and the nature of our humanity, Drucker was profoundly influenced by the writings of Kierkegaard. For Drucker, faith brought meaning and purpose to life. In his essay entitled “The Unfashionable Kierkegaard”, he quoted Kierkegaard as saying:

“Human existence is possible as existence not in despair, as existence not in tragedy, but is possible as existence in faith. Faith is the belief that in God the impossible

is possible, that in Him, time and eternity are one, that both life and death are meaningful.

Faith is the knowledge that man is a creature – not autonomous, not the master, not the end, not the center – and yet responsible and free.”

Thus, the learning and understanding of what it means to responsibly lead and manage people should not be divorced from questions of faith or the question of God. For some in the secular academy or in our secular society, this conclusion may be difficult to accept, but others are ready to recognize its validity.

In his book, *The Fourth Great Awakening*, Robert Fogel, an economist from the University of Chicago and a Nobel Prize winner, traced the history of religious faith in America and its effect on our society and economy. In so doing, Fogel concluded that a major issue in our culture today was simply a lack of a distribution of what he referred to as “spiritual assets”. There was, he said, a void in our society in the development of the character of people and a provision for their spiritual needs. He also went on to say that in order for the business firm of the future to resolve the growing complexities of ethical issues, it will have to acquire more “spiritual capital”. He wrote this, by the way, several years before the current economic collapse.

For us at ServiceMaster, we decided to be overt about the issue as we raised the question of God in our mission statement.

Our corporate objectives were simply stated: To honor God in all we do; To help people develop; To pursue excellence; and To grow profitably. Those first two objectives were end goals; the second two were means goals.

We didn't use that first objective as a basis for exclusion. It was, in fact, the reason for our promotion of diversity as we recognized that different people with different beliefs were all part of God's world.

As a business firm, we wanted to excel at generating profits and creating value for our shareholders. If we didn't want to play by these rules, we didn't belong in the ballgame. But also, we tried to encourage an environment where the work place could be an open community where the question of a person's moral and spiritual development and the existence of God and how one related the claims of his or her faith with their work, were issues of discussion, debate, and yes, even learning and understanding. We considered the people of our firm as, in fact, the soul of the firm.

It did not mean that everything was done right. We experienced our share of mistakes. We sometimes failed and did things wrong. But because of a stated standard and a reason for that standard, we could not hide our mistakes. Mistakes were regularly flushed out in the open for correction and, in some cases, for forgiveness, and leaders could not protect themselves at the expense of those they were leading.

The process of seeking understanding and application of these objectives at all levels of the organization was a never-ending task. It involved matters of the heart as well as the head and it was not susceptible to standard management techniques of implementation or measurement. While at times it was discouraging, it also was energizing as one realized the continuing potential for creativity, innovation, and growth as there was a focus on the development of the whole person.

The responsibility of the business leader must go beyond getting the right things done through others. He or she also must be concerned about what is happening to the person in the process. Those people who are producing profits, who are accomplishing the mission of the firm, are also human. They have cares and concerns, emotions and feelings, beliefs and convictions. They can love or they can hate. As the soul of the firm, they can contribute or detract, motivate or discourage. In their work, they are in the process of becoming as well as doing. The question is whether the work environment contributes to a positive or negative result. People need to be treated as the subject, not just the object of work. One of the stories I share to illustrate this point is an experience I had with two workers when I was traveling on business in Russia and Europe.

When I was in Russia, I had been asked to give several lectures on the service business and our company objectives. While I was in the city now renamed St. Petersburg, I met Olga. She had the job of mopping the lobby floor in a large hotel, which at that time was occupied mostly by people from the West. I took an interest in

her and her task. I engaged her in conversation through the help of an interpreter and noted the tools she had to do her work. Olga had been given a T-frame for a mop, and a bucket of dirty water to do her job. She really wasn't cleaning the floor. She was just moving dirt from one section to another. The reality of Olga's task was to do the least amount of motions in the greatest amount of time until the day was over. Olga was not proud of what she was doing. She had no dignity in her work. She was a long way from owning the result.

I knew from our brief conversation that there was a great unlocked potential in Olga. I am sure you could have eaten off the floor in her two-room apartment – but work was something different. No one had taken the time to teach or equip Olga. No one had taken the time to care about her as a person. She was lost in a system that did not care. Work was just a job that had to be done. She was the object of work, not the subject.

I contrast the time spent with Olga with an experience I had just a few days later while visiting a hospital we serve in London, England. As I was introduced to one of the housekeepers, Nisha, as the chairman of ServiceMaster, she put her arms around me, gave me a big hug, and thanked me for the training and tools she had received to do her job. She then showed me all that she had accomplished in cleaning patients' rooms, providing a detailed before –and–after ServiceMaster description. She was proud of her work. She had bought into the result because someone had cared enough to show her the way and recognize her when the task was done. She was looking forward to the next

accomplishment, and she was thankful. You would have thought she owned the company.

What was the difference between these two people? Yes, one was born in Moscow and the other in New Delhi, and their race, language and nationalities were different, But their basic tasks were the same. They both had to work for a living. They both had modest and limited financial resources. One was very proud of what she was doing. Her work had affected her view of herself and others. The other was not proud of what she was doing, and she had a limited view of her potential and worth.

The difference had a lot to do with how they were treated and cared for in the work environment. In one case, the mission of the firm involved the development and recognition of their dignity and worth. In the other case, the objective was to provide activity and call it work.

But for this to occur, there must be leadership that is both responsible and moral. Leadership that is transparent and willing to lead and serve by example. Leadership:

- that knows what they believe and why they believe it and knows their source of moral authority
- that knows where they are headed and why it is important for people to follow
- that seeks to understand who people are and why they work and not just what they do and how they do it.

- that is willing to be an example in their private and public life of the reality of their faith and beliefs.

Our workplace – our business – is not just a place where we make money and create wealth, but it also is a place that can be a moral community for the development of human character. A community that has a duty of care for what it is selling or producing that extends to the buyer or user and also reflects a responsibility for the environment and common good. A community where it is okay to raise the question of God.

One of the best ways that I found to share and lead in the development of our firm as a moral community was to seek to serve as I led and to reflect the principle that Jesus taught His disciples as He washed their feet – namely that no leader was greater or had a self-interest more important than those being led. In seeking to so serve, the truth of what I said could be measured by what I did.

Servant leadership has been a learning experience for me. It has not come naturally. The first thing I had to understand was what it meant to walk in the shoes of those I would lead. This was a lesson that I would learn as I first joined the ServiceMaster senior management team and spent the first two months of my ServiceMaster career out cleaning floors and doing the maintenance and other work which was part of our service business. In so doing, I was beginning to understand what would be my dependence upon and responsibility to the people I would lead.

During the time I was CEO of the firm, the faces of our service workers would often flash across my mind as I was faced with those inevitable judgment calls between the rights and the wrongs of running a business. The integrity of my actions had to pass their scrutiny. When all the numbers and figures were added up and reported as the results of the firm, they had to do more than just follow the rules or satisfy the changing standards of the accounting profession. They also had to accurately reflect the reality of our combined performance – a result that was real – a result that you could depend upon. A result that would reflect the true value of the firm. Otherwise I was deceiving myself and those that I was committed to serve.

Implicit in leadership is the power to make decisions that affect others. You can be right in your intent and decision but be wrong in how you use power to implement that decision.

The mistakes I have made as a leader that hurt the most are those that have resulted in breached relationships with others. In seeking to achieve specific performance goals, I have at times pressed too hard for results without understanding the subjective factors of fear, insecurity, or risk of failure that were influencing substandard performance of the individual involved. I have learned that people put in a corner must fight or crumble and the rightness of my position can be lost in the defeat of the person.

In such times, there is a need for admitting your mistakes, asking for forgiveness, and seeking reconciliation.

Unfortunately, there are often many trappings around positions of leadership – the perks or prestige of the office and the arrogance of success can tempt leaders to focus on self and think they have all the answers rather than focusing on their responsibility to others. It's that evil of hubris. It is often subtle and can have a cumulative effect on judgment unless it is nipped in the bud.

Let me share another lesson of learning from Peter Drucker that occurred later on in my leadership responsibilities at ServiceMaster and reflects the continuing need to be aware of the subtle effect of hubris.

One of the benefits of my friendship with Drucker is that he never hesitated to point out those areas where I could improve my leadership. One of those important moments of learning occurred when we were traveling together to conduct a management seminar in Tokyo for Japanese business leaders.

After the seminar, Peter and I had dinner. I shared with him my disappointment, and yes, even anger, over the fact that no one from the leadership team of our Japanese business partner had come to the seminar. They had been invited and had promised to attend. Since some of our current and prospective customers were in attendance, it would

have provided an opportunity for them to learn and also to make important business connections.

I explained to Peter that we had recently decided to delay bringing one of our new service lines to Japan and that our partner was upset with that decision. I explained that this was probably the reason its leaders did not come.

I told Peter that I intended to cancel my trip to their headquarters in Osaka and take an earlier flight back to the States. Peter encouraged me to rethink my position and gave some advice, including his thoughts and understanding of Japanese culture. Although I listened to him, I made up my mind that I was not going to accept his advice and I would reschedule my flight the next morning.

When dinner was over, we returned to our respective hotel rooms. At about 10:30 that evening, I received a call from Peter asking me if I would come to his room. He was still concerned about my reactions and wanted a further discussion with me.

As Peter opened the door to his hotel room, I could tell by the look on his face that he was troubled. He told me to sit on the chair near his bed. He then sat down on the edge of his bed and looked me straight in the eye. “Bill,” he said, “you are suffering from hubris. It’s time for you to eat some humble pie.” He went on to explain how quickly leaders can lose touch with the reality of their responsibility when they think their

pride is at risk. He pointed out that my job as leader was to go to Osaka, meet with our business partners, resolve our differences, and rebuild a relationship of trust. This result was needed for the continued growth of our business in Japan and for the opportunities it would provide the people in our business. It was my job to do this as a leader, and it was something that I could not delegate.

It was great advice. The next morning I was on the train to Osaka, and my meeting there accomplished the right result for our business and for our people. I did have to eat some humble pie. The leadership lesson was clear. My leadership responsibility was not about me or my feelings. It was about what should be done for our business and our people.

(Give example of six months later – Komai funeral)

The global market place provides a wonderful opportunity to share your faith and to live it as a responsible leader. There is a common language of performance in the market that **crosses** secular, cultural, and religious barriers. When there is performance people listen. And yes, as some people listen they respond to the redemptive message of God's love.

For me, the world of business has become a channel for fulfilling and living my faith; a channel that has reached from a janitor's closet in Saudi Arabia to the Great Hall

of the People in Beijing, China – from sweeping streets in Osaka, Japan to ringing the bell of the New York Stock Exchange. It has provided the opportunity for me to embrace and engage those who do not believe the way I do, but whom God loves and who, by my words and actions, should see the reality of His love.

As Joshua came to the closing days of his leadership of the nation of Israel, he challenged the people to fear God and serve Him with faithfulness.

It was a challenge, not a command, for God does not compel anyone to follow or worship Him. In Joshua's conclusion, he emphasized this point when he said, "But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve . . . but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

Now, the Hebrew word that is translated "serve" is Avodah, and can also mean worship or work. Yes, that's right – our work, whatever it is, can also be a worship to the God we love as we serve and live our faith. Our work can become a center of our worship as we bring alive the reality that Jesus lived and died for the purpose that those He created and loved may know Him as God and Savior.

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